



Technology has aided genealogists in their search for family.

Getting to the root of family

By Molly Ritvo

With interest in genealogy growing around the world, it is no surprise that many members of Boston's Jewish community are also eager to connect with their own histories.

"Jewish genealogy is bigger than ever," said Newton resident Jay Sage, former co-president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston (JGSGB), an organization dedicated to the promotion of Jewish genealogical research and family history. "More and more Jews are looking for their ancestral history to develop a deeper understanding of who we are."

In part, Sage credited the growing interest to adults in the baby boom generation who now feel a responsibility to preserve a fading past.

"After I suddenly lost my parents, I realized that it is up to me to preserve history," he said. "It dawned on me that I had to gather all I could before even more of the elderly generation vanished."

Heidi Urich, a Cambridge resident and current president of JGSGB, echoed Sage's sentiments and said that many of her relatives were committed to moving on after the Holocaust and did not want to return to the painful memories of Jewish history.

"After the Holocaust, survivors lived in the present and wanted a better life. They were committed to a new life and that meant not exploring the past," said Urich, who started chronicling her family heritage after her mother died. To date, Urich has traced her family history back to the 1750s from researching on the Internet and in libraries across the world.

Jewish genealogy is also gaining popularity, according to Urich, because of the widespread access to current technology. "There was a lack of records until now. All that was available were marriage and death notifications," she said. "Now, with the advent of Google and other Internet records, more and more records can be discovered. Records from the Soviet Union and Germany are now becoming available as well."

One such Web site that houses a wealth of Jewish genealogical information is JewishGen.org, the self-

proclaimed "Home of Jewish genealogy."

According to Warren Blatt, JewishGen's editor-in-chief, the site contains a database of over 400,000 surnames and towns, a family tree of the Jewish people that contains data on nearly four million people, and helpful hints to hopeful genealogists.

"JewishGen is currently the primary Internet source connecting researchers of Jewish genealogy worldwide," said Blatt, who added that the information contained on JewishGen is free and has been researched and compiled by more than 1,000 volunteers. "It is the community that makes Jewish genealogy work."

Blatt posited that interest has boomed partly because Jews now have the time and leisure to discover their past. He also suggested that the TV show "Roots" and Daniel Mendelsohn's book, "The Lost: The Search for Six Million," have helped to mainstream genealogy.

Yet, according to Sage, Jews are not the only religious group to have discovered genealogical research; genealogy is actually part of the Mormon faith.

"In order for the world to be saved, the Mormons believe everyone has to be converted to Mormonism," said Sage. "Mormons are obligated to trace their family history so they can invite their ancestors to convert."

Sage noted that there was once tension between Jewish and Mormon genealogists.

"There was some animosity when Mormon genealogists wanted the names of Holocaust survivors to try to convert them," he added. "I don't think the Mormons touch Holocaust documents anymore."

Local researcher Tom Weiss said he believes that, for Jews, tracing documents is a way to triumph over the Holocaust. "It is our way of keeping the past alive, a past that some wanted to erase," he said. "Jewish genealogy is a way of keeping the tradition alive."

Urich agreed that discovering the past can help Jews live a deeper life in the present.

She said: "I feel like I am living a more Jewish life by knowing where I came from."